

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Theatres of Bharata and Some Aspects of Sanskrit Play-production**

Goverdhan Panchal

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This book by Goverdhan Panchal stands out as a valuable contribution among scholarly publications on the subject of ancient Indian theatre and its dominating dramaturgical document, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The scope and thrust of the book is made clear by the title itself, where the word 'theatres' is used to denote the theatre-houses in ancient India described by Bharata Muni. In addition to the description of theatre-houses, the author has undertaken to analyze only some aspects of the style and content of ancient performances. But as these aspects are those most often discussed, and are often subjects of heated controversy, the interpretations of Goverdhan Panchal on matters like the use of the *yavanikā* or stage curtain, use of props, costume, regional styles of acting, etc., add to the ongoing investigation of the mystery that ancient Indian theatre has been. There is no claim by the author to have considered all facets of ancient theatrical productions or to provide a total picture of ancient India's theatrical art. Nevertheless, the reader can be assured that within its limited scope, the book offers a thorough and accurate survey of research by other scholars besides presenting Goverdhan Panchal's own perceptive analysis.

The book carries a foreword by a well-known authority in the field of Indian performing arts, Dr Kapila Vatsyayan, who summarizes the thrust of the book thus:

... a heroic attempt to reconstruct the theatrical buildings from literary evidences and to relate these to the archaeological evidence, even if scant and rare, such as open-air theatres — the façade of Lomas and also the cave of Bhaja ... Most welcome

is his identification of the architectural elements of members, such as *shālabhanjikā*, *gavāksha*, the *simhavyālas*. Prof. Panchal, naturally, re-interprets the controversial terms, like the *mattavārani* and the *shaddārūka*, and lists lucidly the technical terminology used by Bharata. All this should regenerate fresh interest in Bharata's theatre. After all, theatrical space provides for the presentation of drama, and if the Sanskrit theatre is being revived by contemporary dramatists and theatre directors, then appropriateness of theatrical space is a pre-requisite.

The same objective is reiterated by the author in his preface:

My aim to recreate the theatre of Bharata is threefold. One, it could be reconstructed to stage the ancient Sanskrit plays which would be based on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition and in their own environment. Two, to provide a model for a new theatre form for the emerging Sanskrit dramatic style aiming at presenting [Sanskrit plays] before modern audiences. And, three, to provide a model for an indigenous stage for the third-level dramatic form based on the West-oriented drama which is Indian in context.

With the purpose of the author thus stated, let us see how the book goes about its business. The author's intention that his work should be of practical use to those who are trying to recreate ancient theatre is indeed a laudable one, as it goes beyond the more usual aim of scholars to study ancient texts and forms for their own sake or for purely historical analysis. The scholar and the director are here invited to cooperate for a living art.

Right from Chapter 1, Goverdhan Panchal shows a bias for correlating not only the theatre-house of Bharata Muni but also Bharata's dramaturgy as a whole with the cave art and ethos of the early Buddhist period. He also mentions prominently the references to theatre

in the Jataka stories and Jain texts. The remains at Nagarjunakonda of what he believes to be a later Buddhist period theatre are also mentioned. This correlation, built up later in the book by showing similarities between Buddhist architecture and features of Bharata Muni's theatre, is somewhat incongruous with the dating of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Goverdhan Panchal has adopted. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, he says, "could be placed before the Mauryas and Bhasa, but after Panini — somewhere between 5th century and 4th century B.C., and the theatres described in chapter 11 of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* would be as old if not older" (p. 8). While I find myself in agreement with this dating of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (and have stated many more reasons for it in my book *Dramatic Concepts: Greek and Indian*, 1994), I find that this correlation with Buddhist architecture gives the impression that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* belongs to the much later age of Buddhist caves such as those shown in the plates of Goverdhan Panchal's book — the Lomas cave (250 B.C.), Bhaja (150 B.C.), the Nasik chaitya (150 B.C.), and the late Ajanta and Ellora. In fact, the hypothetical model of the theatre of Bharata Muni that Goverdhan Panchal has sketched (pp. 64–68) in his book has all the features of Buddhist architectural design. If it is admitted by Goverdhan Panchal that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* belongs to the 5th century B.C. or possibly even earlier, I think it follows that the features of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* theatre such as *śālābhanjikā*, the walls, the canopy, *shaddārūka*, etc., could not have belonged exclusively to Buddhist design but, rather, came from designs prevalent in different parts of the country at different times. Also, it must be admitted that as the *nāṭyagriha* (theatre-house) was a popular place, it need not have always followed closely the sophisticated designs of temple and cave architecture.

The second chapter sets the tone of the book. Here the author points out that scholarship has neglected the fact that Bharata Muni's theatre-houses were supposed to follow the age-old rules of *vāstushāstra*, the science of architecture, which has a long history in India. He is against the use of post-realism terms such as 'wings' or

'green-room' to describe parts of the ancient theatre. The confusion that arises from such usage has been rightly pointed out by him. In explaining the ordering of space by the ancients, he shows that the square, the rectangle, and the circle have been

prescribed in specific ways, and the construction of theatre-houses also followed these norms. This is a much-needed exposition to set at rest all kinds of doubts that have been plaguing scholars. The author then proceeds to enumerate the nineteen parts of the theatre-house described by Bharata Muni.

The third chapter takes up the subject of building material — bricks, stone blocks, wooden columns and earth paste — and then goes into a detailed description of the nineteen parts of the theatre. As the *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself does not mention the use of stone blocks or columns, this further indicates that the earliest ancient theatres may have belonged to the first centuries of the millennium before Christ. In his detailed description, Goverdhan Panchal explains the three kinds of theatre-houses — rectangular, square and triangular — and gives us the sizes and space-division for the various parts of each. The construction and/or placement of gorgons and *vedikā*, windows, doors, walls, beam supports and beams for the roof, front- and back-stage are explained. Ornamental features such as pigeon-strings and wall paintings, and functional ones such as acoustics and ventilation are also taken up. With the help of references from ancient literary texts, an accurate and convincing picture of the ancient theatre-house emerges from Goverdhan Panchal's analysis.

In the fourth chapter, the author goes into some aspects of parts of the ancient theatre which have not been quite unambiguously described by Bharata Muni. There is a useful discussion here as to whether the front-stage was lower



than the back-stage or was at the same level. The most controversial part of Bharata's theatre-house, the *mattavāranī*, is dealt with in detail.

The *mattavāranī* has been a subject of widely divergent opinion among scholars for more than a thousand years. It is a crucial matter, as the shape, size, location and use of the *mattavāranī* gives the ancient Indian stage a distinct look and marks it out from stages for performance elsewhere in the world. Most of the modern scholars of India have chosen to describe the *mattavāranī* in such a manner that it resembles the European proscenium stage. But the interpretation given by Abhinavagupta, based on traditional teaching if not direct observation, suggests that it was a space that does not match any known pattern of stage design. To Abhinava, the *mattavāranī* was a space, or rather spaces, located on both sides of the front-stage (*rangapīṭha*). These spaces were in addition to the rectangular stage area, and extended beyond the side-walls of the auditorium (as Abhinavagupta explicitly says, "*maddapāt bahir*"). According to some specialists of his time, remarks Abhinava, the area of one *mattavāranī* was eight 'hands' square, but others considered it to be as deep as the stage itself, which would make it a rectangle of 8 x 16 hands. Some commentators held that the *mattavāranīs* were a hand-and-a-half higher than the stage (*rangapīṭha*), but Abhinava averred that they were of the same height as the stage, a hand and a half high. As the *Nāṭyaśāstra* explicitly says that the *mattavāranī* was adorned with four pillars, it is commonly accepted that these pillars supported some sort of ceiling or canopy over the *mattavāranī*. Thus, according to Abhinava, the *mattavāranīs* are two side-spaces augmenting the stage, decorated with pillars and ceilings, modifying the total shape of the auditorium. (One is tempted to think of them as resembling the *paraskenia* of the Greek stage). However, Abhinava, like Bharata Muni, nowhere mentions the use the *mattavāranīs* were put to. Were they performance spaces? The *Nāṭyaśāstra* chapter on division of acting spaces (*kakṣhyā-vidhāna*), while laying down which part of the stage is to

be used for what purpose, makes no mention of the *mattavāranīs* as acting areas. Nor is it suggested anywhere in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* that the musicians sat in them. The place for the musicians was at the rear of the back-stage. I am therefore tempted to believe that the *mattavāranīs* were used as seating space for exclusive members of the audience, for couples of the royal household, or for the sponsor's family. '*Vāraṇa*' or '*mattavāraṇa*' in architectural texts seem to stand for a structure, embellished or otherwise, used for the purpose of sitting at leisure. Thus, perhaps, the most leisurely class was seated in the *mattavāraṇa* of the classical Indian theatre-house. In that case, the acting area was surrounded by the audience on three sides. And if the *mattavāranīs* are taken to be as deep as the stage itself, then the audience would be evenly distributed on all the three sides and not concentrated on one side of the stage. Such use of *mattavāranīs* would make the seating arrangement of the ancient Indian theatre similar to that of the Greek theatre — the audience surrounding the performance space. While Goverdhan Panchal accepts, by and large, Abhinavagupta's statement regarding the size and number of *mattavāranīs*, he does not place them adjacent ('*pārshvetu*' as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* says) to the front-stage but on the stage itself. This would create two obstructive structures on either side of the front-stage, blocking from the view of the audience the action on the back-stage. Admitting this obstruction, the author argues that the pillars of the *mattavāranīs* were used as stage props and had even other theatrical functions: "Endless were the dramatic functions they [the pillars] performed and numerous [the] forms they assumed . . ." (p. 59). In my opinion, however, had this been so, a meticulously detailed text like the *Nāṭyaśāstra* would have mentioned it explicitly.

In the next chapter, Goverdhan Panchal moves on to some problems of production which are not so dependent on the architectural dimensions of the ancient stage. A detailed inquiry into the various kinds of curtains — *pata*, *yavanikā*, *chitravānikā* — is made in

this chapter. The use of these curtains is explained giving examples from ancient plays, and the modern employment of curtains in traditional theatres like Kudiattam. The problems of handling some big curtains — some were forty-eight feet wide — are discussed in depth. From the internal evidence of the plays, the author concludes that “there were three types of curtains on this stage: *patī* or *apatī* on the stage doors, *yavanikā* between *rangashīrsha* and *rangapitha*, and *citra-yavanikā*, a flexible curtain, to be used anywhere on the stage”. This certainly solves many seeming contradictions.

The next three chapters of Goverdhan Panchal's book seem to have emanated from lectures that he gave on various occasions on some other riddles of the ancient theatre relating to costume, styles of production, and make-up. As for the terms *lokadharmī* and *nātyadharmī*, he seems to be following the standard interpretations available — that they are naturalistic and stylised modes of acting. Chapter 7 enlarges the author's analysis of the problem of *mattavārānī*. This exhaustive survey illustrated with drawings also records the interpretations of many noted scholars over the last fifty years. It would be very useful to a new student of the subject, who can quickly assimilate the information through the graphic representations offered here. Nowhere else does one find such a detailed examination of the *mattavārānī*. In the next chapter, Goverdhan Panchal moves on to a topic much discussed by scholars of earlier times: did Bhasa come before or after Bharata? The question has now been settled for a long time, the answer being that not only Bhasa but all the known Sanskrit playwrights came a long time after Bharata Muni wrote/compiled his work.

The final chapter of the book offers a historical survey of modern productions of Sanskrit plays. Though this is beyond the scope of the book, the material is nevertheless very valuable. The chapter gives an excellent and

authentic account of the staging of Sanskrit plays from the mid-nineteenth century in India and abroad, and is illustrated with fifty-two photographs. It should inspire scholars to produce full-length historical studies of Sanskrit productions. Goverdhan Panchal says there were three phases in which Sanskrit plays were produced. In the first phase (apart from the 1880 Marathi *Shakuntala* which must have been in the traditional *sangeet-natak* mode), plays were produced to highlight the Sanskrit text, asserting the classical tradition of India. These were declamatory efforts, mostly produced by Sanskrit departments of universities or institutions upholding the value of India's ancient heritage, and were clearly part of the nationalist upsurge in the country. Literature overrode the demands of good theatre in these endeavours. (The All-India Kalidasa Samaroha has provided space for such efforts since 1958.) The plays were done in the naturalistic style of European drama, the only difference being the language and the subject-matter. The second phase, according to Goverdhan Panchal, begins around 1974. An attempt was made then to change the stage over from the Western proscenium model to the stage described in Bharata's text. There was simultaneously a rejection of naturalism and an effort to incorporate the gestural, musical, and stylised communication codes of traditional performing arts like Kathak or Kudiattam by a number of directors. At this juncture, Indian theatre was strongly influenced by the experimental theatre of the West, which was violently rejecting its own naturalism, inspired by the theories of Artaud, and turning to forms of Asia and Africa. The traditional performing arts of India now acquired something more than respectability in the eyes of the West — a new recognition of their worth as heritage (which was accorded to literature in the nineteenth century). Appreciation from Western anthropologists and theatre enthusiasts was certainly a factor in this revival. This led to the third phase, which brought to the fore directors who picked up a specific traditional form such as Kudiattam or Chattisgarh Nach or Bhavai,

and produced Sanskrit plays with some improvisations on that traditional form. The phase was quite fruitful, Goverdhan Panchal thinks. However, after reviewing productions of Sanskrit plays in Europe and the North American continent, and then assessing contemporary efforts in India, he very rightly points out that these

... experiments are mostly in the direction of finding contemporary idioms of staging Sanskrit plays for modern audiences, and are not concerned with rediscovering the staging style or styles based on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Whether their creative

attempts are in the right direction or not, only time will decide, however much we may applaud them now. These are individual approaches to the Sanskrit drama with the stamp of individuality.

Although he is aware that he runs the risk of being called a revivalist, Goverdhan Panchal believes that "It is certainly not impossible to reconstruct the true natya style as enunciated by Bharata" (p. 148). His faith in such a possibility highlights the deep significance of Bharata Muni's *śāstra* and bodes well for the future of Indian theatre.

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